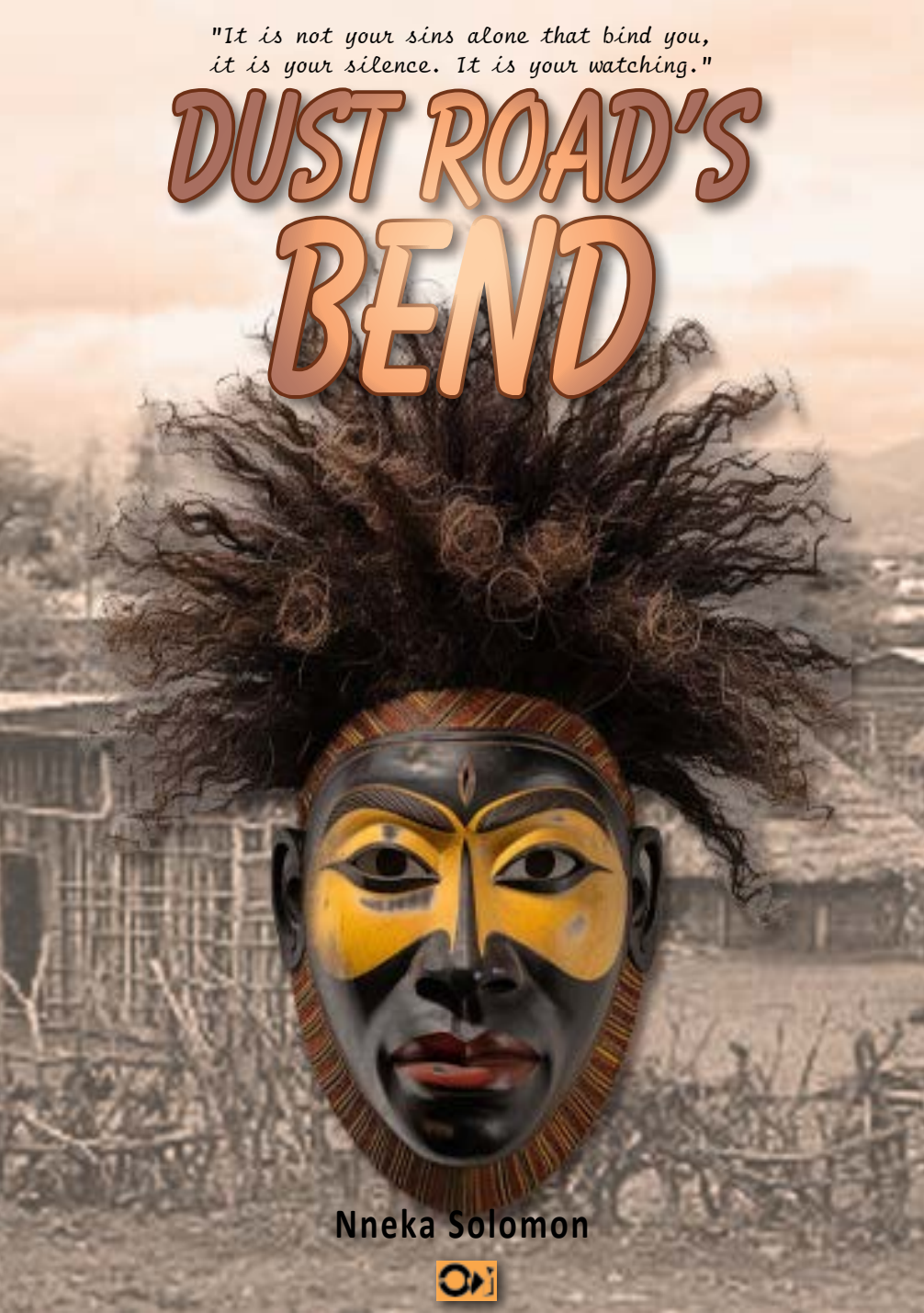
"It is not your sins alone that bind you,
it is your silence. It is your watching."

DUST ROAD'S BEND



Nneka Solomon

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The sky over Mchinji was low and heavy, like it carried secrets. Dust curled at every footstep, and the air, though quiet, buzzed with anticipation. The preacher, Reverend Chikondi Banda, once the pride of the village, had begun to walk differently, shoulders no longer bent in humility, but pulled back as if he was carrying something the rest of the world could not see.

His voice had changed, too. Gone was the warmth, the honeyed scripture that used to pour like healing balm over aching hearts. Now, it came jagged and forceful, each word like a stone skipping off cracked ground.

“It is not your sins alone that bind you,” he said one Sunday morning, pausing mid-sermon. His eyes, darker than roasted maize, scanned the room. “It is your silence. It is your watching.”

The church was full, but no one breathed. Widow Nandolo sat at the back, veiled, her head bowed like a woman preparing for war.

* * * * * * * * * * *

They began to whisper when the preacher stopped showing up at the choir rehearsals. When he missed the funeral of old Man Tembo, who had once baptized him in the Likuni River.

“He’s changed,” said Auntie Fatsani as she sold tomatoes in the market, arranging them like red gossiping mouths.

“He walks like a man with a lion in his chest,” murmured Misozi, the teenage girl who claimed she once saw him weeping behind the granary at dusk.

But it was old Bambo Gule, bent like a shepherd’s staff and sharp as mosquito bite, who first said it aloud. “That man, he has murder in his smile now.”

They found out about the widow through the children.

"Taphunzira kuchezera," little Phiri said while playing with sticks near the footpath. "He goes to her house when the bats come out."

At first, the villagers laughed. But laughter is like a chicken's flutter, it fades quickly when fear swoops in.

"He goes often," said Esnart, the fish-seller, wiping scales off her apron. "Always at night. Always when we cannot see the moon."

No one confronted him. Mchinji people believed in two things: rain, and letting spirits do their work. But when the preacher told a child during Sunday School that some angels carried knives instead of wings, even the strong women who wove mats in the shade began to murmur behind closed windows.

* * * * * * * * * * *

"Let me tell you what I saw," said the watchman, Alufeyo, over a bottle of Chibuku as the sun fell into the horizon like a swallowed egg.

He leaned in. "He came from her house with his shirt torn at the shoulder. Looked like something

grabbed him. Not a person. Something *else*. He wasn't limping. But his eyes…they weren't with him."

"You sure?" someone asked.

"I swear on my dog's grave."

Everyone went quiet.

No one in Mchinji had a dog anymore.

* * * * * * * * * * *

Then the widow's garden bloomed out of season.

Pumpkins the size of babies. Beans that shimmered with unnatural oil. Flowers that sang, not with sound, but with movement, as though they hummed secrets between the leaves.

"Witchcraft," whispered the old women.

But Widow Nandolo smiled like a woman who knew exactly how death smelt before it arrived.

* * * * * * * * * * *

The showdown came on a Saturday, at the borehole.

The preacher arrived, in full clerical garb, though the sun boiled overhead like angry porridge. He didn't greet. He didn't draw water.

"Reverend Banda!" shouted Auntie Fatsani. "Have you come to bless the well or poison it?"

He didn't flinch.

"The time has come," he said, eyes on no one. "The truth has always grown in the dark. Like cassava."

That night, a goat was found gutted outside the widow's gate, its intestines arranged in a spiral. A child claimed the goat had whispered the preacher's name before it died.

* * * * * * * * * * *

One brave soul, Elias, a carpenter with only one good eye, approached the widow's house.

"I came to ask..."

She cut him off.

"He's not mine to explain."

"But something's wrong."

She nodded. “Truth doesn’t bloom in a straight line. It twists. Like a snake in dry grass.”

* * * * * * * * * * *

The truth broke like a fever at the edge of dawn.

Police arrived from Lilongwe. Quiet men in hard shoes. They pulled up floorboards in the widow’s home.

Underneath, a shallow grave.

A man’s bones. Crushed.

Next to them: the preacher’s old wedding ring.

Whispers turned to screams.

He was arrested mid-sermon the next day, shouting about spirits that misled him, voices in mango trees, the sins of love unburied.

The widow stood watching as they took him away.

Someone asked, “Did you know?”

She smiled faintly. “I only knew the sermons stopped making sense when he stopped loving me in secret.”

* * * * * * * * * * *

Mchinji never agreed on what happened.

Some say he was possessed. Others say love twisted him beyond repair. Some believe it was revenge, for a betrayal that happened long ago, when the preacher's wife vanished during a storm.

The widow's garden withered.

But one flower remained. A single white hibiscus. It never opened. Never died.

And every Sunday, the church is half full.

Faith, after all, is just another story people tell to make the silence bearable.

End.

Dust Road's Bend

Nneka Solomon

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Nneka Solomon, part-time educator full-time chronicler of small-town life, spends her days navigating the unpredictable waters of academia and her evenings crafting fantastical tales where the local gossip mill becomes a cauldron of magical intrigue and the town square transforms into a bustling marketplace for enchanted wares.

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